Cultural psychology

ESSAYS ON COMPARATIVE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Contents

Cultural psychology – what is it?

Richard A. Shweder

A discipline is emerging called "cultural psychology." It is not general psychology. It is not cross-cultural psychology. It is not psychological anthropology. It is not ethnopsychology. It is cultural psychology. And its time may have arrived, once again.

While the authors in this volume were never asked to define or explicitly address the idea of a cultural psychology, several of the chapters turned out to be examples of it. They inspired this essay – which is a preliminary attempt to say, taxonomically and narratively, and briefly – what the discipline of cultural psychology was, is, and ought to be about.[1] Ultimately it is a story of cyclical return.

In the short run, however, the essay is a story of one of the pitfalls of the "cognitive revolution" of the 1960s, the failure of the cognitive revolution to develop an adequate theory of the "person," because of the prevailing Platonism implicit in its scientific agenda. The essay is also a scouting expedition across the boundaries of some very treacherous disciplinary territories in the search to recover an important interdisciplinary identity.

Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion. Cultural psychology is the study of the ways subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practice live together, require each other, and dynamically, dialectically, and jointly make each other up.

Cultural psychology is premised on human existential uncertainty (the search for meaning) and on a (so-called) intentional conception of "constituted" worlds. The principle of existential uncertainty asserts that human beings, starting at birth (and perhaps earlier), are highly motivated to seize meanings and resources out of a sociocultural environment that has been arranged to provide them with meanings and resources to seize and to use. The principle of intentional (or constituted) worlds asserts that subjects and objects, practitioners and practices, human beings and sociocultural environments interpenetrate each other's identity and cannot be analytically disjoined into independent and dependent variables. Their identities are inter-

dependent; neither side of the supposed contrast can be defined without borrowing from the specifications of the other.

The basic idea of cultural psychology is that no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while every human being has her or his subjectivity and mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them.

A sociocultural environment is an intentional world. It is an intentional world because its existence is real, factual, and forceful, but only as long as there exists a community of persons whose beliefs, desires, emotions, purposes, and other mental representations are directed at it, and are thereby influenced by it.

Intentional worlds are human artifactual worlds populated with products of our own design. An intentional world might contain such events as "stealing" or "taking communion," such processes as "harm" or "sin," such stations as "in-law" or "exorcist," such practices as "promising" or "divorce," such visible entities as "weeds" and invisible entities as "natural rights," and such crafted objects as a "Jersey cow," an "abacus," a "confessional booth," a "card catalogue," an "oversize tennis racquet," a "psychoanalytic couch," or a "'living' room."

Such intentional (made, bred, fashioned, fabricated, invented, designated, constituted) things exist only in intentional worlds. What makes their existence intentional is that such things would not exist independent of our involvements with them and reactions to them; and they exercise their influence in our lives because of our conceptions of them (D'Andrade, 1981, 1984, 1986; Schneider, 1968, 1984). Intentional things are causally active, but only by virtue of our mental representations of them.

Intentional things have no "natural" reality or identity separate from human understandings and activities. Intentional worlds do not exist independent of the intentional states (beliefs, desires, emotions, etc.) directed at them and by them, by the persons who live in them. Thus, for example, a weed is an intentional thing. It is an intrusive, interfering, or improper plant that you do not want growing in your garden. Consequently, a daisy or a sunflower or a foxglove, or perhaps even a thorny rose that turns up in your vegetable patch might be plucked out as a weed, while one can find intentional worlds where marijuana or dandelions or crabgrass are not constituted as weeds at all. Instead they are cultivated as cash crops.

Because a weed is a weed is a weed, but only in some intentional world, there is no impersonal, neutral, "objective," "scientific," independent-of-human-response, botanical, genetic or (so-called) natural-kind definition of plants that can specify *in the abstract* or *in general* which ones count as weeds. The botanical capacity to self-seed bestows on a plant the power to be a nuisance, if the plant is unwanted. Yet the same plant, if it is wanted, has the power to produce abundant

harvests. And there are other routes by which a plant might make itself troublesome or become misplaced in your garden, ultimately to be weeded out.

It would seem to follow that in some fascinating and important sense, the weeds in our gardens achieve their reality because we are implicated in their existence, and we achieve our reality, at least in part, by letting them become implicated in ours. Our identities interpenetrate and take each other into account. Without us, nature knows little of the existence of weeds. Without the existence of weeds and of all the aims, activities, and practices (Wittgenstein's "forms of life") presupposed by their existence and constitutive of it, there would be less to us worth knowing.

And because a weed is a weed is a weed, but only in some intentional world, what is truly true (beautiful, good) within one intentional world (e.g. "that is a 'weed'; therefore it ought to be plucked out of the ground and discarded") is not necessarily universally true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world; and, what is not necessarily true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world may be truly true (beautiful, good) in this one or in that one.

According to the principle of intentional worlds, there is no logical requirement that across intentional worlds the identity of things must remain fixed and universal; while within any particular intentional world (e.g., the 20th-century intentional world of American baseball; or the 16th-century intentional world of English witchcraft) the identity of a thing (e.g., a "foul ball," or a "witch") can be real and the question of its real identity (e.g., was that a "foul ball"? or is she a "witch"?) can be a subject for rational and objective dispute.[2]

Cultural psychology is the study of intentional worlds. It is the study of personal functioning in particular intentional worlds. It is the study of the interpersonal maintenance of any intentional world. It is the investigation of those psychosomatic, sociocultural, and, inevitably, divergent realities in which subject and object cannot possibly be separated and kept apart because they are so interdependent as to need each other to be (see Kleinman, 1986; Shweder, 1986, 1988, 1989).

Finally, cultural psychology is an interdisciplinary human science. It aims to develop several companion disciplines, especially an anthropology (reunited with linguistics) suitable for the analysis of sociocultural environments (meanings and resources – "forms of life") in all their intentionality and particularity, and a psychology (reunited with philosophy) suitable for the analysis of persons in all their intentionality and historicity.

Answering a "what is it?" question

It is a principle of cultural psychology – the principle of intentional worlds – that nothing real "just is," and that realities are the product of the way things get represented, embedded, implemented, and reacted

to in various taxonomic and/or narrative contexts. The reality of cultural psychology is no exception to the principle. As a constructed intellectual discipline, cultural psychology has a taxonomic and narrative identity whose reality is not independent of our sharing with each other, debating, and acting upon, our conception of it.

To say what something is, taxonomically, is to say what it is not, to say what it is a kind of, and to point to instances of it. It is to subsume it as a particular example of something more general, and it is to generalize it, so as to turn something more particular than it into its example. In apposition, to say what something is, narratively, is to describe its origination ("once upon a time") and its destiny (its aim, purpose, or function), and to comprehend its current status, in the here and now, as part of a longer story of strivings, achievements, obstacles, growth, adaptations, failures, dormancy, or never-ending cyclical return.

Since cultural psychology can be traced through many ancestral lines, one looks forward to other tellings in other forums as the discipline is rediscovered and reevaluated. Placed in its taxonomic context, an ideal cultural psychology has qualities that distinguish it from general psychology, cross-cultural psychology, psychological anthropology, and ethnopsychology.

It is not general psychology

First, cultural psychology must be distinguished from general psychology. "People are the same wherever you go" is a line from the song "Ebony and Ivory" by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder; that line describes pretty well a basic assumption of general psychology. The assumption is sometimes referred to as the principle of "psychic unity" of humankind.

General psychology assumes that its subject matter is a presupposed central (abstract and transcendent = deep or interior or hidden) processing mechanism inherent (fixed and universal) in human beings, which enables them to think (classify, infer, remember, imagine, etc.), experience (emote, feel, desire, need, self-reflect, etc.), act (strive, prefer, choose, evaluate, etc.) and learn.

The aim of general psychology is to describe that central inherent processing mechanism of mental life. Since the central processing mechanism is presumed to be a transcendent, abstract, fixed, and universal property of the human psyche, general psychology has the look, taste, and smell of a Platonic undertaking. For it is that presupposed central and inherent processing mechanism that is the true object of fascination in general psychology and not all the concrete, apparent, variable, and particular stuff, substance, or content that is operated upon by the processor or may interfere with its operation.

It is a necessary step in the general psychology enterprise to distinguish intrinsic (internal) psychological structures and processes

from extrinsic (external) environmental conditions, to procedurally abstract and analytically withdraw the knower from what he or she knows, and to insist on a fundamental division between the processing mechanism of the person versus his or her personal or group history, context, stimulus and task environment, institutional setting, resources, beliefs, values, and knowledge.

Of course, people are not the same wherever you go. Not even Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder are the same. And no general psychology is so unworldly as to overlook that fact. General psychology may be Platonic, but it is certainly not thoughtless. The principle of general psychology – that "people are the same wherever you go" – does not mean that people are the same in *every* respect. It means that transcendentally, "deep down" or "inside," where the central processing mechanism lives, people are the same (or, alternatively, what gives people "psychic unity" is what makes them all the same "deep down" or "inside").

All the other stuff – stimuli, contexts, resources, values, meanings, knowledge, religion, rituals, language, technologies, institutions – is conceived to be external to or outside of the central processing mechanism. Observations on Rajput widows in India, motivated by special beliefs and desires, immolating themselves along with their deceased husband on his funeral pyre; or observations on Chinese abacus experts, assisted by special mental representational techniques, solving arithmetic problems "in their head" at a speed several orders of magnitude faster than the rest of humanity – all that may be rich material for humanistic inquiry, journalistic reporting, and literary representation, yet all of it must, given the Platonist impulse, be viewed, in and of itself, as incidental or secondary to the aim of general psychology.

The aim, as noted, is to get behind superficial appearances, local manifestations, and external resources to isolate the intrinsic central processing mechanism of the mental life and describe the invariant laws of its operation.[3]

It is that Platonic impulse, one suspects, that was behind the memorable remark from an anthropologist who, upon hearing about Mike Cole and John Gay's research in Liberia, argued that the thinking processes of West African tribesmen do not differ from our own; only their values, beliefs, and classifications differ, which is why the Kpelle perform differently on psychological tests (see Cole & Gay, 1972:1066).

It is that same impulse, one suspects, that once led Mel Spiro, with his interest in group differences in personality (1955:257) to express the methodological concern that in demonstrating emotional and behavioral differences across different sociocultural contexts, anthropologists had not demonstrated the existence of *genuine* personality differences at all. They "have merely demonstrated that different stimuli evoke different responses."

The methodological "merely" in Spiro's analysis is revealing. For one

might have argued, methodologically and non-Platonically, that the power of a particular stimulus to evoke a particularizing response is not independent of the way a person or people get particularly involved with it psychologically – classify it, reason about it, tell stories about it, appropriate it to their purposes – and that that is what *genuine* personality differences are about. In intentional worlds "stimuli" are not external to, or independent of, our understanding of them, and those understandings are a large part of what we mean by "personality" (see, e.g., Mischel, 1973).

In other words, one might have argued, from the point of view of intentional worlds, that the study of genuine psychological differences between ethnic groups should be conceived as the study of how different sociocultural environments become different *by virtue of* the ways they are differently constituted psychologically by different peoples so as to possess different response evocation potentials.

Platonism is an ancient and formidable school of interpretation. It is crucial to recognize that the long-lived and imaginative idea of an inherent (fixed, universal) and central (transcendent, abstract) processing mechanism, a psychic unity to humankind, will never be seriously threatened by the mere existence of performance differences between individuals or populations. Those performance differences can always be interpreted, and should be interpreted, as the consequence of incomparabilities, incommensurabilities, or just some plain differences in all the other stuff; which leaves permanently unsettled and eternally unsettleable the question of whether there really is, deep down, an inherent and central processing mechanism hidden behind all the other stuff. Platonism and its alternatives will always be with us, offering different interpretations and competing visions of the nature of the human psyche.

It is equally crucial to recognize that general psychology, with its Platonic imagery and premises, is not the only imaginative and interpretive game in town for understanding the mental life. As I try to elaborate in my discussion of cultural psychology later in the chapter, if one subscribes to an alternative, non-Platonic principle of intentional worlds, that nothing in particular exists independent of our involvement with it and interpretation of it, it is possible to conceive of the mental life as variable and plural and substantive and constructively stimulus-bound. And it is possible to characterize a large part of the mental life in terms of the particularizing ways that peoples constitute and get involved with particulars, thereby giving to those constructed stimuli, task environments, and sociocultural contexts the powers they have to evoke the special responses they evoke.

Nevertheless the aim of general psychology is Platonic, and it is its Platonic aim to seek out a presumed central processing mechanism of human beings and to isolate it from all the other stuff. Given that aim, it is not surprising that general psychology has constructed its own special intellectual standards for knowledge representation (its preferred ontology) and knowledge seeking (its preferred epistemology).

Ontologically speaking, knowledge in general psychology is the attempt to imagine and characterize the form or shape of an inherent central processing mechanism for psychological functions (discrimination, categorization, memory, learning, motivation, inference, etc.). Epistemologically speaking, knowledge seeking in general psychology is the attempt to get a look at the central processing mechanism untainted by content and context.

The main intellectually motivating force in general psychology is the idea of that central processing device. The processor, it is imagined, stands over and above, or transcends, all the stuff upon which it operates. It engages all the stuff of culture, context, task, and stimulus material as its content. Given that image, the central processor itself must be context- and content-independent. That means, in effect, that the processor must be describable in terms of either properties that are free of context/content (abstract, formal, structural properties) or properties that are general to all contexts/contents (invariant, universal properties).

Still speaking ontologically, it is that image of an inherent (fixed, universal) and central (abstract, transcendent) processing mechanism – a context/content independent and omnipresent unity to mind – that explains the great esteem conferred in general psychology upon accounts of the mental life in terms of universal mathematical functions and invariant formal limits or constraints, such as exponential decay functions mapped in an abstract psychological space for representing the probability of generalization between pairs of stimulus events in any domain for any sensory modality for any species (Shepard, 1987); or magical numbers, seven plus or minus two, used to represent the maximum capacity of the central processing mechanism for distinguishing values, whatever the values, along any single dimension, whatever the dimension, in any single instant, wherever and whenever the instant (G. Miller, 1956).

Great esteem is also conferred within general psychology upon certain ways of seeking knowledge. Knowledge seeking in general psychology is the attempt to gain direct access to the central processing mechanism without having to become quagmired in all the other stuff. General psychologists qua general psychologists are typically wary of rain forests, swamps, and the complex textures and tones of everyday life, language, and institutional settings. They take comfort in a radically simplifying (some would call it a radically "surreal") article of faith, namely, that the central processor is most likely to reveal its pristine form when lured by meaning-free or unfamiliar or novel stimulus items into a context-free environment.[4]

Nonsense syllables, white coats, and darkened bare rooms may be misguided or monstrous things of the distant past for serious researchers in general psychology, yet the experimental lab is still treated as a privileged space, where, quite fantastically and against much evidence, it is conveniently assumed that one can physically enter a transcendent realm where the effects of context, content, and meaning can be

eliminated, standardized, or kept under control, and the central processor observed in the raw.

General psychology presumes that there exists a central processing mechanism that can be isolated from the different particulars it might encounter, and that isolating that processing mechanism is what genuine psychological research is about. That image of a central processing mechanism and the search for a window or a peep hole through which to view it naked and pure may explain why in general psychology there has become entrenched the intuition that real science is the doing of experiments in a lab.

Unfortunately, even if there does exist the presumed inherent central processing mechanism obscured or hidden behind appearances, the psychological laboratory is probably not the mythical enchanted doorway through which one can step straight away into a more fundamental reality. Indeed, one suspects the sociocultural environment of lab life is not even plausibly equivalent to the physicist's vacuum or the physiologist's X ray for directly accessing things that are basic, deep, or hidden from view.

The ideas of a context-free environment, a meaning-free stimulus event, and a fixed meaning are probably best kept where they belong, along with placeless space, eventless time, and squared circles on that famous and fabulous list of impossible notions. For when it comes to the investigation and examination of psychological functioning, there probably is no way to get rid of all the other stuff, even in the lab.

Of course, nothing I have said argues against studying "stuff" in a lab. If the stuff brought into the lab (or simulated there) is interesting enough stuff to study, and if one can bring it into the lab (or reproduce it there) without spoiling it (those are big "ifs"), then one can certainly study it there, and there may even be very good reason to do so (see, e.g., Milgram, 1974). Whether there is a royal road running through the lab to the land of the central processing mechanism of the mental life is, however, quite another issue.

In closing this section on general psychology I would like to comment briefly on Roger Shepard's (1987) discussion (published appropriately enough in *Science* magazine) of "a universal law of generalization for psychological science," for it is a revealing illustration of Platonist presuppositions in general psychology and the way they guide a research enterprise and structure the interpretation of evidence by even the most brilliant of practitioners.

Shepard begins and ends his paper by holding out Newton's mathematical and universal law of gravitation as the standard by which to judge the success or failure of the discipline of psychology. Psychology, Shepard avers, should strive to be the science of the invariant mathematical forms underlying psychological functioning. Three hundred years after the publication of Newton's *Principia* Shepard thinks psychology can finally point to a success, a mathematical law of stimulus generalization "that is invariant across perceptual

dimensions, modalities, individuals and species" (p. 1318) and that shows that psychology "may not be inherently limited merely to the descriptive characterization of the behavior of particular terrestrial species" (p. 1323) or the properties of particular stimulus domains (pp. 1317–1318).

Shepard's "universal law" is basically an abstract spatial representation of an exponential decay function for stimulus generalization likelihoods between pairs of stimuli. The exponential decay function is detectable in several data sets from humans and pigeons, which record for selected domains (e.g., consonant phonemes, triangles of different sizes and shapes) the probability that a response learned to any one stimulus within the domain will generalize to any other stimulus within the domain. Shepard believes that this exponential decay function is the central processing mechanism for stimulus generalization in its pristine form – abstract and transcendent (= deeply interior), fixed and universal (p. 1318).

To catch a glimpse of this abstract transcendent processing function, Shepard is quite prepared to, indeed he feels he must, exteriorize, treat as illusory, and withdraw his attention from, several levels of reality that play a major part in human classificatory behavior.

First he must withdraw his attention from measurable similarities and differences in the stimulus materials themselves. For it has been shown – he views the relevant findings as "troublesome" and "discouraging" – that there exists no universal mathematical function for predicting the probability of a generalization response from measurable physical characteristics of pairs of stimuli; those mathematical functions seem to vary by stimulus domain (p. 1317). For example, the mathematical function for the color space may differ from the function for tonal scales, and these may differ by species or individuals; and, within a particular stimulus domain, for example, the color space, a response to a particular color chip may generalize to a distant hue at the opposite end of the spectrum.

So if there is to be a universal law of generalization it is not going to be a law of the stimulus environment. It must be a pure psychological function not a psychophysical function (p. 1318). It cannot tell you which stimulus items in any domain will be generalized to, only that the likelihood of there being generalization behavior across pairs of stimulus items (whichever they should turn out to be) will decay exponentially. To reach the central processing mechanism of stimulus generalization Shepard must get beyond the stimulus environment.

Then he must also get beyond learning processes. For he does not expect his universal law of generalization to describe generalization behavior under multiple learning trials, because "differential reinforcement could shape the generalization function and contours around a particular stimulus into a wide variety of forms" (p. 1322).

Finally, he must get beyond reconstructive memory processes. For it is known that the universal law is *not* descriptive of generalization

behavior when learning trials are delayed. This Shepard interprets as a failure of the law due to interfering "'noise' in the internal representation of the stimuli" (p. 1322).

At this point a reader of *Science* interested in similarity and difference judgments might be tempted to ask what he or she has learned about human classificatory behavior. Having withdrawn his attention from the stimulus environment and from processes of learning and memory, why does Shepard think he is looking at something fundamental like a central processing mechanism of mind?

The answer is clear and Platonic. Late in his paper Shepard points out that strictly speaking his universal law is descriptive of stimulus generalization behavior *only* when "generalization is tested immediately after a single learning trial with a novel stimulus" (p. 1322).

Here we come to the great and unbreachable divide between general psychology and cultural psychology. Moved by the Platonic impulse (and perhaps, one speculates, by the prestigious image of Newton's gravitational forces operating in a vacuum), Shepard seems to think that something truly fundamental about the mind – an inherent central processing mechanism – can be divined only if we can transcend the noise and clutter of the environment by bleaching it of familiar things and impoverishing it of feedback, and by isolating the mind from its own mental supports.

The alternative interpretation – the view from cultural psychology – is that the mind left to its own devices is mindless. From that perspective, Shepard's proposed "universal law of generalization for psychological science" is little more than an extremely unqualified description of the special, restrictive (and one might add the rather peculiar) effects on similarity and difference judgments of unfamiliar stuff (novel stimuli) examined in one-trial learning environments.

According to the principles of cultural psychology, the effects of stuff won't go away, even in the lab, for there is no context-free environment. We are intentional beings who live in an intentional world of constituted and represented particulars – domain-specific, concrete, subject-dependent, artifactual things. Absolute transcendence is a great and marvelous thing, but not if you want to keep the psyche in psychology.

The implication, of course, is that genuine success for psychological science will come when we stop trying to get beyond the "noise" and start trying to say interesting things about some of the more interesting, robust and patterned varieties of it.[5] That is the challenge for cultural psychology. But I am getting ahead of my story. First we must consider cross-cultural psychology (not to be confused with cultural psychology), which can be very noisy, perhaps too noisy.

It is not cross-cultural psychology

As we have seen, one of the hazards of general psychology as a Platonic undertaking is the inherent difficulty of distinguishing statements about

a presumed inherent central processing mechanism from statements about all the other stuff. It is that difficulty that has kept the discipline of cross-cultural psychology in business.

Cross-cultural psychology is a subdiscipline of general psychology that shares with general psychology the Platonic aim of characterizing the inherent central processing mechanisms of the mental life. Practitioners of the subdiscipline carry the general psychologist's tests and research procedures abroad.

Occasionally cross-cultural psychological research replicates some regularity observed with educated Western subjects (Ekman, in press). The main discovery of cross-cultural psychology, however, is that many descriptions of mental functioning emerging out of laboratory research with educated Western populations do not travel very well to subject populations in other cultures. Thus, for example, almost all adults in Geneva, Paris, London, and New York display so-called concrete operational thinking on Piaget's conservation of mass, number, and liquid quantity tasks. Many adults in many Third World capitals do not (Cole, 1988; Cole & Scribner, 1974; Hallpike, 1979).

The definitive problematic of cross-cultural psychology is the struggle, fought in Platonic terms, over how to interpret population-based differences in performance on psychological tests and tasks. Within the framework of Platonist thinking there are only two possibilities: (1) that the performance differences exist primarily because the central processing mechanism inherent in mind has not yet become fully developed among certain peoples of the world (Hallpike, 1979; see Shweder, 1982, for a critique); and (2) that the performance differences exist primarily because the psychologist's tests and tasks baffle and bewilder certain peoples of the world and deny them a fair opportunity to display the extant central processing mechanisms of their mind (Cole 1988; Cole & Scribner, 1974).

Notice that the principle of psychic unity is presupposed by both interpretations. According to the first interpretation, psychic unity is the anticipated result of central processor development, but the universal and uniform structures inherent in mind will only mature under ideal environmental conditions. This leads some cross-cultural psychologists to become concerned with possible external stimulators of growth of the central processing mechanism – literacy, schooling, toys, Socratic dialogue, and so on.

According to the second interpretation, psychic unity is not just a potential inherent in mind. Psychic unity has already been achieved. It is there, waiting to be revealed. This leads other cross-cultural psychologists to become concerned with "etics" and "emics" and with the incommensurateness or inappropriateness across cultures of test materials and research tasks; and it leads them to search for more "natural" or "realistic" settings, activities, and institutions in everyday life where central processor functioning goes on unimpeded by the artificial or unfamiliar conditions of psychological task environments.

Cross-cultural psychology has lived on the margins of general